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The Warhead Gap Between CIA and DIA

As far as the United States is concerned, the most fundamental fact underlying any arms control agreement is the number of nuclear warheads the Soviet Union can hurtle down on this country.

Yet the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency don't agree on this basic fact of life or death, and their disagreement is enormous.

The CIA thinks the Soviets have 6,500 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) warheads, or roughly three times the U.S. number.

The DIA insists that the correct figure on Soviet warheads is 8,500, or roughly four times the U.S. arsenal.

The DIA has declared its higher figure in its last five secret reports on the subject. As late as last week some analysts in the DIA were trying to have their 8,500-warhead estimate published in the latest issue of "Soviet Military Power."

That's the booklet that is issued as part of the Defense Department's effort to persuade Congress, the American public and the NATO allies that the Soviet threat is real and growing.

But at the last minute, the DIA chickened out and allowed publication of the CIA's less scary estimate.

The new booklet originally was scheduled for release Monday, until some Defense Department official wise in the ways of public relations pointed out that it would then be dubbed the "April Fool's Report."

Why can't the two intelligence agencies agree? How can they be 2,000 warheads apart?

Quite simply, intelligence on someone else's warheads is hard to obtain. There's no way to count what is inside an ICBM's nose as it's photographed in the silo. So it is basically a matter of guesswork based on known capability.

A Soviet SS18 could hold two dozen warheads. On that both agencies agree.

But the CIA believes the Soviets are abiding by the warhead-limitation portion of the unratified SALT II agreement, which sets a maximum of 10 warheads per ICBM.

The DIA, however, assumes that the Soviets attached as many warheads as they have tested successfully, and that is 14 per ICBM.

With more than 300 SS18s deployed, that accounts for much of the 2,000-warhead discrepancy between CIA and DIA estimates. The remaining 700 or 800 involve recently deployed new ICBM systems, including the mobile SS16 missiles banned by SALT II.

So who's right?

In this case, we'd be inclined to lean toward the DIA estimate.

Though the Pentagon agency has gone off half-cocked at times, more often than not its view of the Soviet threat has proved correct over time, compared with the CIA's usually rosier analyses.

An example of this occurred in 1975, when the CIA finally agreed that its estimate of Soviet military spending had been seriously understated, by 50 percent for the year 1970, for instance.

When the embarrassing figures could no longer be denied, the CIA brought in its word doctors to sugar coat the bitter pill of confessed error.

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